

Revelation - Why It Matters

May 14, 2017

Revelation 1:1-20

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

9 I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. 19 Write therefore the

things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

REVELATION 1:1-8

Look! He Is Coming!

¹Revelation of Jesus the Messiah! God gave it to him to show his servants what must soon take place. He signified it by sending a message through his angel to his servant John, ²who, by reporting all he saw, bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus the Messiah. ³God's blessing on the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and on those who hear them and keep what is written in it. The time, you see, is near!

⁴John, to the seven churches in Asia: grace to you and peace from He Who Is and Who Was and Who Is To Come, and from the seven spirits that are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus the Messiah, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Glory to the one who loved us, and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and father—glory and power be to him for ever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds, and every eye shall see him; yes, even those who pierced him. All the tribes of the earth shall mourn because of him. Yes! Amen.

⁸'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, Who Is and Who Was and Who Is To Come, the Almighty.

The house lights went down, and the excited buzz of audience chatter quickly subsided as well. Soon it was quite dark in the theatre. Then music began, softly and mysteriously at first, but soon building up, swelling and rising. Just as it reached its climax, the curtain was drawn up in an instant, and we all gasped not only at the blaze of sudden light but at what we saw.

The stage was brilliantly set so as to give the impression that we, the audience, were ourselves in a large room, one end of which was on display. Almost at once actors began to emerge from hiding-places in the auditorium, so that their voices were coming from among us as they made their way up to the stage. And the stage itself, designed as a great room in a castle, was already half full of people, and animals too. There was an air of anticipation: clearly something important was about to happen ...

I will leave you to guess what play it was. But the point for us now, at the start of Revelation, this most wonderful and puzzling of biblical books, is to get our heads round the idea of *revelation* itself. That's the word that has come to be used as the title for the book (not 'revelations', plural, please note). This is partly because the original word, 'Apocalypse', wasn't well known at the time of earlier translations into English. Now, of course, 'apocalypse', and its cousin 'apocalyptic', have become well known in English. Perhaps too well known: they have come to refer, not so much to the sudden unveiling of previously hidden truth, but to 'apocalyptic' *events*, violent and disturbing events such as natural disasters (earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis) or major and horrific human actions. In that sense, September 11, 2001 was an 'apocalyptic' event.

But that isn't quite the sense that 'revelation' or 'apocalypse' has in this book. John, its author—sometimes called 'John the Seer' or 'John the Divine', sometimes (probably wrongly) identified with the John who wrote the gospel and epistles—is picking up a way of writing well known in the Jewish world of the time. This way of writing was designed to correspond to, and make available, the visions and 'revelations' seen by holy, prayerful people who were wrestling with the question of the divine purpose. Like the theatre audience, they and the rest of God's people felt themselves in the dark. As they studied their ancient scriptures and said their prayers, they believed that the music was building up to something, but nobody was quite sure what. But then, like someone all by themselves in the theatre for the first performance, the 'seer'—the word reflects the reality, 'one who sees' something that other people do not—finds that the curtain is suddenly pulled up. Suddenly the 'seer' is witnessing a scene, is in fact invited to be part of a scene, within God's ongoing drama.

'Revelation'—the idea, and this book—are based on the ancient Jewish belief that God's sphere of being and operation ('**heaven**') and our sphere ('earth') are not after all separated by a great gulf. They meet and merge and meld into one another in all kinds of ways. For ancient Jews, the place where this happened supremely was the **Temple** in Jerusalem; this is not unimportant as the action proceeds. Most humans seem blind to this, only seeing the earthly side of the story. Some are aware that there is more to **life**, but are not quite sure what it's all about. Ancient Jews struggled to see both sides of the story, though it was often too much of an effort.

The early Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth had become, in person, the place where heaven and earth met. Looking at him, and contemplating his death and **resurrection** in particular, they believed they could see right into God's own world. They could then understand things about his purpose which nobody had imagined before.

But it didn't stop there. As the early Christian movement grew, and developed momentum, further questions emerged. What was God doing now? What were his plans for the little churches dotted around the Mediterranean world? Where was it all going?

In particular, why was God allowing followers of Jesus to suffer persecution? What line should they take when faced with the fastest growing ‘religion’ of the time, namely the worship of Caesar, the Roman emperor? Should they resist?

There may have been several groups of Christians in ancient Turkey, where John seems to have been based. They would have been mostly poor, meeting in one another’s homes. By contrast, people were building grand and expensive temples for Caesar and his family in various cities, eager to show Rome how loyal they were. What would Jesus himself say about this? Did it mean that, after all, the Christians were wasting their time, following a crucified Jew rather than the one who was rather obviously the ‘lord of the world’?

Revelation is written to say ‘no’ to that question—and to say much more besides. At its centre is a fresh ‘revelation of Jesus the **Messiah**’ (verse 1). John, with his head and his heart full of Israel’s scriptures, discovered on one particular occasion, as he was praying, that the curtain was pulled back. He found himself face to face with Jesus himself.

We will come to that in the next passage. But in this passage, the introduction-to-the-introduction of his book, we already learn five important things about what sort of book this is and how we ought to read it. (It goes without saying that we ought to read it with careful prayer and thought, being ready for God to lift the curtain so that we, too, can glimpse more than we had imagined.)

First, this book is a four-stage *revelation*. It is about something God has revealed to Jesus himself (verse 1), and which Jesus is then passing on, via an angel, to ‘his servants’, through one particular servant, John. God—Jesus—angel—John—churches. These lines get blurred as the book goes on, but the framework remains basic.

Second, the book takes the form of an extended *letter*. There are particular letters in chapters 2 and 3 to the seven churches in western Turkey, but the book as a whole is a letter from John to all the churches, telling them what he has seen.

Third, the book is a *prophecy* (verse 3). Like many prophets in ancient Israel, John draws freely on earlier biblical traditions. These were in themselves revelations of God and his purposes. Again and again, they come up fresh, in new forms.

Fourth, the book functions as *witness* (verse 2). Here we meet a familiar problem. The words for ‘witness’ and ‘testimony’ are basically the same, but it’s hard to settle on one of these English words to the exclusion of the other, and I have used both. We should, though, remember two things whenever we see either word.

(a) They regularly carry a sense that God is ultimately conducting a great heavenly lawcourt. In that lawcourt, the ‘witness’ borne by Jesus and his followers is a key to the ultimate judgment and verdict.

(b) They regularly carry the sense which the Greek original word, ‘martyr’, has given to the English language. Those who bear this ‘testimony’ may well be called to suffer, or even to die, for what they have said.

Fifth, and far and away the most important: everything that is to come flows from the central figure, Jesus himself, and ultimately from God the father, ‘He Who Is and Who Was and Who Is To Come’ (verses 4, 8). Even in this short opening John manages to unveil a good deal of what he believes about God and Jesus, and about the divine plan. God is the Almighty, the beginning and the end (verse 8: Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and this title occurs at the beginning and the end of John’s book (see 22:13)). Other ‘lords’ and rulers will claim similar titles, but there is only one God to whom they belong.

And Jesus is the one who, through his death and resurrection, has accomplished God’s purpose. His love for his people, his liberation of them by his self-**sacrifice**, his purpose for them (not just to rescue them, but to put them to important work in his service)—all these are stated here briefly in verse 6. And, not least, Jesus is the one who will soon return to complete the task, to set up his rule on earth as in heaven.

Nobody in the first century knew exactly when Jesus would return. We still await that moment today. But Christian living, and indeed belief in this one God, only makes sense on the assumption that he will indeed come to set everything right at last.

We settle in our seats, put other concerns out of our minds, and wait for the curtain to rise.

REVELATION 1:9-20

Jesus Revealed

⁹I, John, your brother and your partner in the suffering, the kingdom, and the patient endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet. ¹¹‘Write down what you see in a book’, it said, ‘and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.’

¹²So I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. As I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the middle of the lampstands ‘one like a son of man’, wearing a full-length robe and with a golden belt across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white, white like wool, white like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like exquisite brass, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶He was holding seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp

two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth. The sight of him was like the sun when it shines with full power. ¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though I was dead.

He touched me with his right hand. ‘Don’t be afraid’, he said. ‘I am the first and the last ¹⁸and the living one. I was dead, and look! I am alive for ever and ever. I have the keys of death and Hades. ¹⁹Now write what you see, both the things that already are, and also the things that are going to happen afterwards. ²⁰The secret meaning of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, by the way, and the seven golden lampstands, is this. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches themselves.’

Some years ago there was an eclipse of the sun. These things happen rarely enough, and to witness it is a great experience. But staring at the sun, as it slips behind the moon and then emerges the other side, is dangerous. If you look through binoculars, or a telescope, the sun’s power on your eye can do permanent damage. It can even cause blindness.

On this particular occasion, there were public warnings broadcast on radio and television, and printed in the newspapers, to the effect that people should be careful. Only look, they said, through special dark glasses. Eventually one person, who obviously had very little understanding of natural phenomena, got cross about all this. Surely, they thought, this was a ‘health and safety’ issue. A letter was sent to the London *Times*: if this event was so dangerous, why were the government allowing it in the first place?

Fortunately, even the most totalitarian of governments has not yet been able to control what the sun and the moon get up to. But the danger of full-power sunlight is worth contemplating as we hear John speaking about his vision of Jesus. As I write this, the sun has just emerged through watery clouds; even so, I can’t look at it for more than a second before having to turn away. So when John, with the brightness of a Mediterranean sky in his mind, speaks of Jesus in this way (verse 16), we should learn to think of this Jesus with a new kind of reverence.

For some, Jesus is just a faraway figure of first-century fantasy. For others, including some of today’s enthusiastic Christians, Jesus is the one with whom we can establish a personal relationship of loving intimacy. John would agree with the second of these, but he would warn against imagining that Jesus is therefore a cosy figure, one who merely makes us feel happy inside. To see Jesus as he is would drive us not to snuggle up to him, but to fall at his feet as though we were dead.

This vision of Jesus (verses 12–16) introduces us to several things about the way John writes. Like someone reporting a strange dream, the things he says are hard to imagine all together. It’s more like looking at a surrealist painting, or a set of shifting computer-generated images. It’s not a simple sketch. For a start, when John hears a voice

like a trumpet (verse 10), he tells us that ‘I turned to see the voice’. There is a sense in which this is just right: the Jesus whom he then sees is indeed. The Voice, the living **Word** of the father, the one through whom God spoke and still speaks. And the words which Jesus himself speaks turn into a visible sword coming out of his mouth (verse 16), echoing Isaiah’s prophecy both about the coming king (11:4) and about the suffering servant (49:2). A great deal of this book is about ideas-made-visible, on the one hand, and scripture-made-real on the other. It is, in fact, the sort of thing someone soaked in scripture might see in a dream, after pondering and praying for many days.

In particular, this vision of Jesus draws together the vision of two characters in one of the most famous biblical visions, that of Daniel 7. (Along with the books of **Exodus**, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah, Daniel is one of John’s favourites.) There, as the suffering of God’s people reaches its height, ‘the Ancient of Days’ takes his seat in **heaven**, and ‘one like a **son of man**’ (in other words, a human figure, representing God’s people and, in a measure, all the human race) is presented before him, and enthroned alongside him. Now, in John’s vision, these two pictures seem to have merged. When we are looking at Jesus, he is saying, we are looking straight through him at the father himself.

Hold the picture in your mind, detail by detail. Let those eyes of flame search you in and out. Imagine standing beside a huge waterfall, its noise like sustained thunder, and imagine that noise as a human voice, echoing round the hills and round your head. And then imagine his hand reaching out to touch you ...

Yes, fear is the natural reaction. But here, as so often, Jesus says, ‘Don’t be afraid.’ It’s all right. Yes, you are suffering, and your people are suffering (verse 9). Yes, the times are strange and hard, with harsh and severe rulers running the world and imposing their will on city after city. But the seven churches—seven is the number of perfection, and the churches listed in verse 11 thus stand for all churches in the world, all places and all times—need to know that Jesus himself is standing in their midst, and that the ‘angels’ who represent and look after each of them are held in his right hand.

And the Jesus in question has, as his credentials, the fact that he ‘was dead’, and is ‘alive for ever’ (verse 18). Like someone whispering to us that they know the secret way out of the dungeon where we have been imprisoned, he says, ‘I’ve got the keys! The keys of death and Hades—I have them right here! There’s nothing more you need worry about.’

To grasp all this requires **faith**. To live by it will take courage. But it is that faith, and that courage, which this book is written to evoke.

Already we are learning quite a bit about the way John writes, and the way he means his readers to understand what he says. Like anyone describing a dream or a vision, he must know that what he says is impressionistic. It appeals not to logic, but to the imagination—which has been starved rotten in some parts of our culture, and

over-stimulated in others. Now we are being asked to imagine: what would it look like if the curtain between heaven and earth were suddenly pulled up, revealing the Jesus who had been there all along but whom we had managed either to ignore or to cut down to our own size? This is the answer: a Jesus who is mind-blowing, dramatically powerful but also gentle and caring; a Jesus in and through whom we see his father, God the creator; a Jesus who has spoken, and still speaks, words which explain what is going on in the present, and warn of what will happen in the future (verse 19).

John, we discover here (verse 9), is on the island called Patmos, about 35 miles off the coast of south-western Turkey. He is there ‘because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’; this probably means that the authorities have put him there, in exile, as a punishment for his fearless teaching, and to try to stop his work having any further effect. The result has been the exact opposite. Exile has given him time to pray, to reflect, and now to receive the most explosive vision of God’s power and love. He is still, he says, a partner with the churches ‘in the suffering, the **kingdom**, and the patient endurance in Jesus’: an odd combination, we might think. How can the ‘kingdom’—which means the sovereign rule—sit together with suffering and patient endurance? That is part of the whole point of the book. Jesus himself won the victory through his suffering, and so must his people.¹

TITLE AND BLESSING

Revelation 1:1-3

1:1-3 As strange as it may seem to modern readers, the entirety of verses 1 and 2 are, in reality, the title of the book. As with most ancient titles, this one is a summary of the argument of the whole book, as well as of its purpose. The title also includes the name of the author.

The subject of the book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word “revelation”—*apokalypsis*, which is the second word in the book and which has given it its current title—does not appear again. Yet it encapsulates all its contents, which are indeed a “revelation.”

The content of this revelation, given by God to Jesus Christ, had to do with “what must soon take place.” If we take this to mean that persecution will increase and Christians need to be prepared for it, then he certainly was proven right by later events. On the other hand, John apparently expected the total fulfillment of God’s plan to take place in the near future, and in that case he was mistaken. Does that error invalidate his entire message? It does if,

¹ Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 1–10). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.

as many seem to believe, his message was a blueprint for the future, for John was wrong on the crucial matter of timing. On the other hand, if John's message is essentially a call to trust in God, in whose hands the future lies, and to resist temptation and faithless compromise on the basis of that trust, then his message is still valid, even though the end did not come when he expected. The central point in John's message is not the timing of events, but God's final triumph over evil.

Verse 2, still part of the title, does not refer to what John did in the past, apart from this book. Presumably he was already a prophet before his exile to Patmos. But normally a title such as this would be written after the book had been completed; therefore past tenses such as "testified" and "saw" refer to the actual content of the book. The means whereby this revelation was given can be depicted in the analogy of a chain whose main links are God-Jesus-the angel-John-his readers.

Then comes the first of seven blessings that appear in Revelation. (Besides the one in 1:3, the other six appear in 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14.) The first blessing is twofold: It includes "the one who reads aloud," and then "those who hear and who keep what is written."

The NRSV correctly says "reads *aloud*," for what is envisioned here is that the book will be read out loud to the congregations gathered for worship. We would do well to remember this, for something is lost when words intended to be read out loud to an entire congregation in worship become the object of private study by an individual. While the private study of scripture is important and commendable, it must not take the place of public reading, for most of scripture—and certainly the book of Revelation—was originally written to be read by the community of faith as it gathered for worship. The book is addressed to them as a community, and whenever it refers to its readers as "you" we must remember that John uses the Greek plural form.

THE SALUTATION

Revelation 1:4-8

1:4-8 This is a typical opening for a letter in the first century. Today, we begin with the date, then the name and address of the intended reader, then a greeting, the body of the letter, and finally our name. At that time, the order of a letter was somewhat different. Usually the first thing to appear was the name of the writer. Since your Bible is probably open at the beginning of Revelation, look back at the beginning of the books just before Revelation, and you will see that the Epistle of Jude begins with the word "Jude," and that the second and third epistles of John begin with "The elder." (Look back and see how many of the other epistles in the New Testament begin with the name of the writer or writers. Note also the beginning of the letter which those who were gathered in Jerusalem send in

Acts 15:23.)

Next in the normal order of a letter came the name of the addressee. (Again, you may see this in the examples mentioned above.) In this case, they are “the seven churches that are in Asia.” Since the number seven is used constantly in this book to denote the fullness or perfection of something, one could surmise that “the seven churches” is simply another way of referring to the entire church. We know that there were other churches in Asia at that time, at least in the cities of Colossae, Hierapolis, and Troas. Yet, we must remember that in chapters 2 and 3 John will address specific messages to each of seven churches. Thus, it would seem that the seven churches are both specific churches and a symbol that stands for the entire church.

In the typical epistolary genre, especially as it appears in the New Testament, the name of the addressee is followed by a salutation and then by a doxology. In this case, the salutation has a strange trinitarian structure, for John wishes them grace and peace “[1] from him who is and who was and who is to come, and [2] from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and [3] from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” The reference to God as the one “who is and was and is to come” is probably a term commonly used for God in Jewish circles, for it appears in other Jewish literature of the time. The meaning of the “seven spirits” is still debated among interpreters. Most likely it is an ancient way of referring to the fullness of the Spirit. Finally, the third source of grace and peace is Jesus Christ himself. (You may wish to compare this with the typical Pauline greeting, which wishes upon his reader grace and peace from God and from Jesus Christ.)

Still before getting into the body of the letter comes a doxology—a word of praise. (Again, you may wish to compare this with Paul’s letters, where after the salutation there is usually a word of praise or thanksgiving.) John’s doxology here includes three main parts: first, a trinitarian word of praise (vv. 4b–6); second, a hymn of praise (v. 7); and finally a word from God (v. 8).

In such a doxology, the writer sometimes gave an indication of the main thrust of the letter. Here, it is important to note that John tells his readers at the very beginning that they have been made into “a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.” This is a reference to the promise in Exodus 19:6, “you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Even more than that, it states that Christians belong to a kingdom that is not the Roman Empire and that they serve a “God and Father” who is neither the emperor in Rome nor the various interests of the surrounding society. In this regard, note that the doxology also ascribes “dominion” elsewhere than to Rome or to its representatives.

After this trinitarian formula, the doxology moves on to a hymn that is introduced with the word “Look!” John is about to tell of his visions; but he is inviting his readers to look also, so that they, like him, may see the coming triumph of Jesus and the judgment on “all

the tribes of the earth.” Finally, this introductory doxology ends with words from God, the one “who is and who was and who is to come,” as in 1:4, and “the Almighty,” which by this time was the traditional way in which Jews translated into Greek the Hebrew title of “Lord of hosts.”

What God says is “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” Since these are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, this would be like saying today, “I am from A to Z.” The same expression occurs also in 21:6 and 22:13. In this case, this final word of God completes the doxology before the body of the letter.

In brief, the book of Revelation begins as a letter, and is indeed a letter addressed at the “seven churches” in Asia. (You may wish to note that the book also ends as a letter, 22:21.) Thus, although it contains a series of visions and hymns, and seven shorter letters, one to each of the seven churches in Asia, Revelation is presented in the form of a single epistle—no less so than one of the epistles of Paul.

In this letter, John makes clear that his vision is not for himself alone but is also for his original readers in the seven churches—and, by extension, for us too. He is about to tell us what “he saw” (v. 2); but he is also inviting us to “Look!” (v. 7).

THE GREAT VISION

Revelation 1:9–20

As was the case with several of the prophets of old, John’s book begins with a grand vision that sets the tone for the entire book. And, also as those ancient prophets (compare for instance Isa. 6:1 and Ezek. 1:1–3), John begins by telling about the circumstances of his vision.

The Setting (1:9–11)

1:9–11 John identifies himself, not on the basis of a title of authority, but rather on the basis of solidarity with his readers. He is their brother and shares with them “the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance.” The word that the NRSV translates as “persecution” can also be translated as “suffering” (NIV) or as “tribulation” (KJV). Thus, it does not necessarily imply that there was a general policy of persecuting Christians or even that there was such a policy in Asia. It certainly does mean, however, that Christians were going through difficult times.

It is significant that, together with “persecution,” John mentions “the kingdom” and “patient endurance.” For the general population, “the kingdom” belonged to Domitian, whose reign involved a political order in which John’s readers counted for little. But John tells his readers that they share not only in tribulation but also in “the kingdom.”

(Remember that in 1:6 John said that Christ has “made us a kingdom.”) This kingdom, though present, is hidden under the circumstances of persecution or suffering. Therefore, Christians who live with the tension between “suffering” and “the kingdom” must respond with “patient endurance,” until God’s purposes are fulfilled—an important reminder not only for John’s readers at the time but for all of us who still live with the glorious vision of the kingdom and the sufferings and injustice of the present age.

John was on the tiny and scarcely populated island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” He does not say literally that he had been exiled there. It is possible to understand his words to mean that he had gone there to preach. One would wonder, however, why John, who had been living in one of the most heavily populated provinces of the empire, would have felt the urge to preach in Patmos rather than in one of the many centers of population in the area. Also, there is no record or hint that there was a Christian church in Patmos in early times. Therefore, the traditional interpretation, that John was on Patmos as an exile, seems the most likely.

That he was “in the Spirit” means that he was in ecstatic communion with God and thus was ready for the vision that was about to come to him. That this was “on the Lord’s day” means the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection of the Lord, the day when the church gathered to break the bread of communion. Thus it is not surprising that so much of John’s vision is couched in terms of worship. Precluded from attending the present worship of his beloved churches, he sees beyond the present “persecution” to “the kingdom” and its heavenly worship. That he hears a loud voice “like a trumpet” is fitting in this setting, for throughout the Old Testament the trumpet signifies the cultic presence of God (see, for instance, Leviticus 23:24: “a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts”).

What the voice says sets John’s agenda for his entire book: He is to write what he sees and send it to “the seven churches,” which are then listed. (On these seven churches, collectively and individually, see our comments on 2:1–3:22.)

The Vision (1:12–20)

1:12–20 This entire passage is reminiscent of Daniel 7:13–14 and 10:5–10 (which you may wish to read as background). The seven lampstands, as John is told at the end of the vision, symbolize the seven churches to which he is to write. The fact that the “one like the Son of Man” is “in the midst of the lampstands” means that “the heavenly Christ is no absentee landlord. He is present in his earthly communities” (Harrington, *Revelation*, 52).

The description of the One whom John sees is majestic and patterned after Daniel 10. He is dressed in the typical attire of a high priest or of someone in very high office. His white hair and blazing eyes are signs both of his great age and of perennial strength and authority. His feet are made of a metal alloy that the NRSV translates as “burnished bronze” but which probably refers to a gold alloy that was almost as valuable as gold and may have

been a product for which Thyatira was known. His voice, compared in Daniel with “the roar of a multitude,” here is “like the sound of many waters.”

The seven stars that he holds in his right hand, we are told later (1:20), are “the angels of the seven churches.” There is much debate as to what or who these angels may be. (See the commentary on 2:1.) In any case, what the reference means here is that he holds even now the seven churches in his hand and thus cares for them and has power over them. The two-edged sword coming from his mouth is a common image for the Word of God, which is the only—and more than sufficient—weapon this figure carries. Finally, the face “like the sun shining with full force” is a reference to the divine glory, on which no one can gaze and live (Ex. 33:20).

No wonder, then, that John falls “as though dead” before this majestic vision. And great wonder, then, that the majestic figure—who is none other than Christ in his full glory—stoops to touch him and says, “Do not be afraid”!

There are two important points to be made about this vision, for they clarify John’s message and theology. First, this is a vision of Christ, as Christ himself will immediately explain: “I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever.” Yet this Christ is also presented as the Almighty, the Ancient of Days, the One who has the keys of Death and of the place of the dead (Hades, in 1:18). Throughout his book, John emphasizes the majestic power of Jesus, the Christ, the Lamb who was slain, and John speaks of that power in terms that are clearly divine.

Second, notice the startling good news the passage conveys. We tend either to think of the Mighty One in terms so majestic that there is a chasm between the divine Being and us, or to cut God down to size so that we may feel more comfortable in the divine presence. But here John presents us with an overpowering vision of Christ’s majesty and might—so brilliant that “his face was like the sun shining with full force”—and yet this mighty Christ stoops to touch John and says, “Do not be afraid.” This means not only “do not be afraid of me” but also that, since Christ holds “the keys of Death and of Hades” and since Christ is with you, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, of which you should be afraid. To John, exiled in Patmos, and to his first readers suffering in a hostile society, this must have been good news indeed. And so it should be for us, for this is the Gospel!²

² González, C. G., & González, J. L. (1997). *Revelation*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 12–19). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.